

# Top 5 Reasons to Let Kids Choose Their Own Books

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Over the past 18 years, I've done my share of "traditional" teaching: I chose a book, I decided how many pages my students would read each night, I wrote questions to see if they read the book, I came up with what I thought were awesome projects so the kids could have fun after reading the books.

Then, about six years ago, I started realizing that most of what happened in my classroom was about ME, not about the kids. I try not to beat myself up about it, because that was the way everyone in my department taught, and honestly, it was the way I had been taught. The thing that changed was I started reading more than I ever had before.

I started to read professional books about literacy instruction.

And I stepped up my reading of young adult books in an effort to overhaul my classroom library.

And once I started reading all of those books and talking about the books I was reading with my students, I started to realize that I needed to change the way I was doing things.

So here is what I've learned over the past few years about kids and choice, in no particular order.

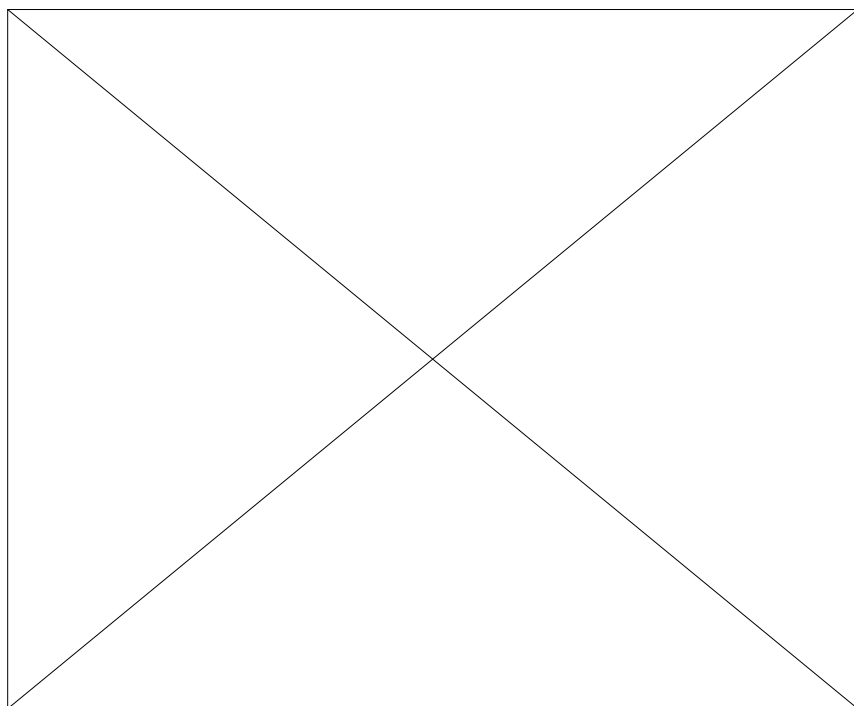
1. **When you let kids choose what they read, they will take risks.** This year, I asked my students to read widely across a variety of genres. While I required a certain number of books in particular genres, I left the titles up to the kids. I found in my conversations that students who had been stuck in a reading rut appreciated the nudge to explore other genres and picked up books they never would have read otherwise. I now have students who at the beginning of the year said, "I hate fantasy books, especially ones with dragons and fairies" reading books like *The Sixty Eight Rooms* and *Small Persons With Wings*, which is not your typical fairy book!
2. **When you let kids choose what they read, they will read more.** Back in the day of the whole class novel, I was lucky if my students read five books over the course of a school year. Now, I have students reading upwards of 100 books a year. Of course, not every student reaches that volume, but honestly, my goal is for them to read more than they did the year before. Students repeatedly tell me in conferences, "Mrs. Rench, I've never read so much before in my life!" Music to my ears, not because they are speeding through books, because most of them aren't. Rather, I'm thrilled because these students are discovering reading can have an important place in their lives.
3. **When you let kids choose what they read, they become better writers.** See Reason #2. We know that kids who read more tend to be better writers. I have found that students not only are better writers, but they WANT to write, often "fan fiction" that takes them farther into the worlds of the books they love.

4. **When you let kids choose what they read, they enjoy reading; it's not a chore.** This is the response I got over and over again when I asked my students why teachers should let their kids choose their own books. They related stories of lock-step reading and how frustrating it was. They shared how much they hated filling out reading logs and answering canned questions that didn't ask about their thinking about their reading. Now my students beg for more reading time in class and are eager to share their thoughts with their classmates AND with me. They know I'm a reader, too, so we have some great conversations!

5. **When you let kids choose what they read, they become empowered.** When I asked my students about the importance of self-selected reading, I didn't expect them to tell me that letting them choose their books showed I trusted them. After thinking about it, I realized they're right... I had to trust them to make good choices about their reading, and they had to trust me to suggest new books and push them to challenge themselves over the course of the year. Because of this foundation of trust and respect, my students are much more willing to make (and take) book recommendations to each other and to seek out new titles even before I can bring them into the classroom.

The communities language arts teachers create in their classrooms are special. In no other content area do kids have the opportunity to think and talk about the issues that affect them in the same ways as they can through the books they read and the pieces they write. When we trust our students to take control of their own reading and give up some of the control we've become accustomed to, great things can happen.

Check out my students' thoughts on this matter in their own words:



(To see the video larger, click on EMBED and then VISIT THIS VIDEO at Animoto.)

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*Mindi spreads the #nerdybookclub love as a seventh grade language arts teacher in the Chicago suburbs. You can find her on Twitter as @mindi\_r and read her blog at <http://nextbestbook.blogspot.com> (<http://nextbestbook.blogspot.com/>).*